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means of distinguishing some of the players in the current act of this ongoing political drama from the players in Act II. "Viet Cong" is a contraction of the phrase "Viet Nam Cong-San," which means, simply, "Vietnamese Communist(s)." It is a descriptive term, not necessarily pejorative except, perhaps, in the sense of "If the shoe fits. . . ." It is a useful, precise and, as we shall see, accurate generic label for the individuals leading the present insurgent movement, at all levels, and for the organizational structure through which that insurgency is controlled and directed.

Not surprisingly, the reactions of many whose concern with Viet Nam is of recent origin are analogous to those of theatergoers who walk into the middle of the third act of an extremely complex drama ignorant of what has gone before. To understand the Viet Cong insurgency, its relationship to the North Vietnamese régime in Hanoi (the D.R.V.) and to the National Liberation Front and the People's Revolutionary Party in South Viet Nam (and *their* respective interrelationships), it is essential to appreciate the historical setting within which the Viet Cong movement developed and the ends it was created to serve.

Throughout their almost four decades of unremitting struggle for political power, the Vietnamese Communists have demonstrated great skill in coping with new problems and great tactical flexibility in pursuing unwavering strategic objectives. Yet, though skillful in learning from past failures, they have often become the victims of previous successes. For the past quarter-century the Vietnamese Communists have been doctrinally addicted to the political device of a broad front organization, dominated and controlled from behind the scenes by disciplined Communist cadres, but espousing general sentiments to which persons of all political inclinations can subscribe (though the formulation of these sentiments has invariably involved a special lexicon of key terms to which Communists and non-Communists attach radically different meanings). They have always rigidly subordinated military activity to political ends, and employed it not to inflict strategic defeat on enemy forces in the conventional sense, but as an abrasive to wear down their adversaries' will to fight and force their enemies to accept interim political settlements favorable to the continued pursuit of Communist political objectives.

Because of this Vietnamese Communist penchant for repeating political and military stratagems, a knowledge of recent Vietnamese history is particularly helpful in understanding the pres-

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ent insurgency. Although Westerners may be largely ignorant of the scenario and detailed plot development of the previous acts of Viet Nam's continuing political drama, the Vietnamese most decidedly are not. Virtually all politically minded Vietnamese have spent at least their adulthood, if not their whole lives, during the Communist struggle for power. Few indeed have not had their lives altered, conditioned or shaped thereby. Without appreciating what the Vietnamese have lived through and without recognizing some of the things they know intimately—often from all-too-firsthand experience—Westerners cannot hope to understand the attitude of Vietnamese now living south of the 17th parallel toward the insurgency, the Viet Cong, the National Liberation Front and the Communist régime in Hanoi.

## II

Under the direction of the man who now calls himself Ho Chi Minh, the Indochinese Communist Party was organized in January 1930. For the next decade the Vietnamese Communists concentrated on perfecting their organization, jockeying for position within the rising anti-French nationalist movement and attempting to undercut nationalist leaders or groups whom they could not subvert or bring under Communist control, using any means available, including betrayal to the French.

In 1941, the Vietnamese Communists joined a nationalist organization called the League for Vietnamese Independence (Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi—or Viet Minh) which was sponsored by the Chinese Nationalists as a vehicle for harassing Japanese forces in Indochina but swiftly subverted by the Vietnamese Communists to further their own political objectives. By 1945 the Viet Minh movement was under complete Communist control, despite the continued presence and subordinate participation therein of non-Communist nationalist elements whose names and talents the Communists were more than willing to exploit. In the chaotic aftermath of Japan's precipitate surrender, the Communists used the Viet Minh as a device for seizing power in Hanoi and (on September 2, 1945) proclaiming the existence of the "Democratic Republic of Viet Nam" under the presidency of Ho Chi Minh.

On November 11, 1945, in an effort to make the Viet Minh government more palatable to non-Communist Vietnamese and to the Chinese Nationalist forces then occupying Viet Nam down

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to the 16th parallel, Ho formally "dissolved" the Indochinese Communist Party, though the impact of this gesture on the discerning was considerably attenuated when the same day witnessed the formation of a new "Association for Marxist Studies." Complete control over the Viet Minh and the subsequent resistance struggle, however, remained unchanged in essentially the same hands as those which control North Viet Nam and the insurgency below the 17th parallel today.<sup>2</sup>

By the late spring of 1946, the fact of Communist control over the Viet Minh (despite the "non-existence" of the Party) was becoming increasingly apparent, as was the fact that Ho's political manoeuvring and stalling negotiations with the returning French were not going to work. In preparation for the inevitable struggle, Ho endeavored to broaden the Communists' base of nationalist support. In May 1946 he announced the creation of a new "popular national front" (Lien-Hiep Quoc Dan Viet Nam), known as the Lien Viet, whose announced objective was the achievement of "independence and democracy." The Viet Minh was merged with, and eventually absorbed by, the Lien Viet, though its name remained to serve as a generic label for those who participated in the subsequent armed struggle against the French. The Communists also brought into the Lien Viet two other small splinter parties which by then were under complete Communist control: the "Democratic Party," designed to appeal to "bourgeois elements" (*i.e.* urban trade, business and professional circles), and the "Radical Socialist Party," designed to enlist the sympathies of students and intellectuals.

The war with the French broke out on December 19, 1946, and its general course is sufficiently well known to require no rehearsal here. The northern part of Viet Nam constituted the principal theater of military operations; the struggle in the south, though intense, was primarily a terrorist and harassing action designed to keep the French off balance and prevent them from concentrating either their attention or their forces on the war in the north. Though the Viet Minh achieved these objectives, their efforts in South Viet Nam were beset with a continuing series of problems. French control of the sea, air and major overland routes left the Viet Minh in the south dependent for supplies, reinforce-

<sup>2</sup> Despite the Vietnamese Communists' claim that their party did not "exist" under any name from 1945 until 1951, on August 31, 1953, the Cominform journal noted that Vietnamese Communist Party membership increased from 20,000 in 1946 to 500,000 in 1950.

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ments, cadres and communications on a tortuous set of jungle tracks running through Laos (along the western slopes of the Annamite Chain) which came to be known, collectively, as the "Ho Chi Minh Trail." Saigon politics were considerably more complex than those of Hanoi, and non-Communist Vietnamese political groups were both more numerous and more powerful in the south than they were in the north. Furthermore, the Communist leaders of the Viet Minh had a series of command and control problems with their southern organization which took several years to resolve.

In 1945, the senior Viet Minh representative in southern Viet Nam was a Moscow-educated disciple of Ho Chi Minh and the Third International named Tran Van Giau, whose blatant ruthlessness and indiscriminate terrorist tactics alienated key groups that the Viet Minh were anxious to bring into their fold, such as the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai and Binh Xuyen. Giau was accordingly recalled to Hanoi in January 1946 and his duties as Viet Minh commander in the south were assumed by Nguyen Binh. Although eminently successful in harassing the French and furthering the cause of the nationalist revolution, Binh—a former member of the Communists' most militant nationalist rivals, the V.N.Q.D.D.—was never fully trusted by the Communist high command in the north and came to be considered excessively independent. In 1951 he was replaced by Le Duan, a charter member of the Indochinese Communist Party who is now First Secretary of the Communist Party in North Viet Nam and one of the most powerful figures in the Hanoi régime. Until 1954, and perhaps even later, Le Duan continued to play a major role in developing and directing the Viet Minh organization in the south and in ensuring that it remained under firm Communist control. However, in late 1952 or early 1953 he was apparently compelled to share his authority with Le Duc Tho, the present head of the North Vietnamese Communist Party's Organization Bureau and also a member of its Politburo.<sup>3</sup>

The 1949 Communist victory in China had a profound influence on the course of events in Viet Nam, particularly after the Viet Minh offensive in the fall of 1950 cleared the French out of the frontier area and gave the Viet Minh a common border with

<sup>3</sup> During the Viet Minh era Le Duan and Le Duc Tho apparently had a violent quarrel over tactics which Ho Chi Minh himself had to settle. The details of this dispute are still obscure, but the resultant enmity between these two men has never been completely dissipated.

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their new Communist neighbor. The military consequences of ensuing Chinese Communist support to the Viet Minh cause are fairly well known. The political consequences, less well known in the West, were of at least equal significance. With an increasingly powerful fraternal ally in immediate proximity, the Communist leadership of the Viet Minh became progressively less dependent on the good will and support of non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists. The mask could now be slipped. The fact of Communist direction of the Viet Minh no longer had to be concealed, the instruments of Communist control could be made more effective, the nature of that control more rigid and its extent more pervasive.

The first major step in this direction was taken on March 3, 1951, when the Indochinese Communist Party reappeared as the Dang Lao Dong Viet Nam, or Vietnamese Workers' Party. The Lao Dong swiftly assumed a position of absolute political primacy within the Lien Viet front, though for appearances' sake the "Democratic" and "Socialist" parties mentioned above were kept in existence. The overt reconstitution of the Communist Party was doubtless prompted by a variety of considerations, of which the most important was probably the fact that covert domination of the Viet Minh movement via a clandestine apparatus whose very existence had to be concealed was an awkward and inefficient process. It necessitated reliance on persuasion as well as coercion and, further, complicated the task of advancing Communist political objectives within those areas under Viet Minh control.

The Viet Minh was ostensibly a purely nationalist movement dedicated to the twin goals of independence and democracy; its stated objective during the first phase of the armed struggle (1946-1951) was simply to throw out the French. The emergence of the "new" party, however, brought forth a new slogan: "The anti-imperialist and the anti-feudal fights are of equal importance." What this meant became increasingly apparent during the course of a systematic program which the Communists soon initiated and took five years to complete. It was designed to make the Party itself more doctrinally orthodox and to restructure the whole society, at least of North Viet Nam, along lines consonant with Communist dogma. This program was conducted in five stages, each carefully prepared and each preceded by intensive sessions of "thought reform" for both Party and non-

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Party cadres to ensure that they would in fact execute the orders they were about to receive.

The first or "economic leveling" stage, launched in 1951, was designed to ruin the wealthier peasantry and the urban businessmen (to the extent that French control of the towns permitted this) through a complicated system of arbitrary and punitive taxes patterned on Chinese Communist models—as, indeed, were all phases of this Vietnamese Communist program.<sup>4</sup> The second stage was a short, sharp wave of terror launched throughout large parts of North Viet Nam one evening in February 1953, a week before Tet, the lunar new year, and sustained for precisely fifteen days.<sup>5</sup> The patent objectives of this terror campaign were to cow the populace, in preparation for what lay ahead, and eliminate all potential centers of effective resistance. When the terror was shut off after accomplishing its purpose, Ho Chi Minh made one of his celebrated weeping apologies.

The next phase of the Communist program, implemented during 1953 and 1954, was euphemistically labelled "Land Rent Reduction." Carefully selected and specially trained teams of hardcore Communist cadres (some of which almost certainly had Chinese "advisers") went quietly to each village, made friends with the poorest therein, organized them into cells and helped them to draw up lists classifying their more prosperous neighbors with respect to wealth, status, political leanings and revolutionary zeal. Once all was in readiness, the "land reform battalions" came out in the open, set up kangaroo courts and administered summary "people's justice" to "exploiters" and "traitors." Each land-reform team had a pre-assigned quota of death sentences and hard-labor imprisonments to mete out and these quotas were seldom underfulfilled. In addition to calculated and extensive use of terror, the Communists marshalled all the pettiness, jealousy and vindictiveness of village life to serve their political ends. The punishments carried out extended not only to those actually convicted of "crimes" but also to their families, who were stripped

<sup>4</sup> North Viet Nam had virtually no large businesses in the Western sense; Vietnamese termed "capitalists" by the Lao Dong were generally what we would term small businessmen or merchants. Though there were inequities in land ownership in North Viet Nam, the Red River delta had the most extensive pattern of private ownership to be found anywhere in Asia and there were virtually no large "feudal" holdings of the kind that existed in pre-Communist China, or even in the Mekong delta region of South Viet Nam.

<sup>5</sup> Tet is the most important traditional Vietnamese family and religious holiday. Launching a terror wave just before Tet in Viet Nam is like launching one a week before Christmas in the United States.

of their possessions, turned out of their homes, denied means of obtaining a livelihood and deprived of the documentation (*e.g.* ration cards) essential to existence in a Communist-controlled society. They became, officially, "non-persons" whom it was a crime to succor. The fact that many of those convicted and far larger numbers of their immediate relatives who suffered the attendant consequences had taken an active part in the resistance against the French was considered immaterial and irrelevant. No one was safe or immune from the judgments of the "people's courts," not even life-long members of the Communist Party.

Despite its incredible barbarity and violence, the Land Rent Reduction Campaign was but a preliminary—and a mild one by comparison—to the Land Reform Campaign proper which followed, and which lasted from 1954 until 1956. Essentially the same methods and techniques were employed but on a much larger scale (*e.g.* the mandatory quota of death sentences and imprisonments for each village was increased fivefold). No one will ever know the exact human cost of these two campaigns, but the number of people killed was probably on the order of 100,000, and the number who suffered dire personal hardship was probably about half a million. Since North Viet Nam has a population of about 18 million, these campaigns had a political impact roughly equivalent to that which would be felt in America if the U.S. Government deliberately engineered the murder of over a million American citizens.

The rationale for this politically motivated slaughter was rooted in the dogmatic fanaticism of the Vietnamese Communist leadership. The fact that only a small percentage of the Party membership had genuine proletarian or "poor peasant" origins was doctrinally embarrassing and made a purge doctrinally mandatory. Dogma required that the "feudal-landlord" class be eliminated. Though no such class really existed in North Viet Nam, it had to be created so that it could be destroyed. The object of the exercise was to purge the Party, restructure North Vietnamese society, smash all real or potential opposition, and impose an iron grip of Communist control. The excesses, however unfortunate, were "necessary."

Once the Land Rent Reduction and Land Reform campaigns had accomplished their objectives, the Lao Dong in 1956 opened the final phase of its five-step program. It was known as the "Rectification of Errors" and designed to restore North Viet

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Nam to the Communist version of "normalcy." The excesses of the recent past were officially admitted and, by implication at least, apologies were tendered. Ho wept (again). Truong Chinh resigned as Secretary-General of the Party (though he remained a member of its Politburo); so too did the D.R.V.'s vice minister for land reform. General Giap made a speech to the Tenth Congress of the Party Central Committee during the course of which he acknowledged a long list of "errors" and mentioned that 12,000 Party members had been released from jails to which they had been unjustly consigned. (How many were imprisoned in the first place was never stated.) The apologies and explanations, however, provided an overwhelming body of irrefutable evidence regarding what had actually transpired and made it abundantly clear that throughout the whole process the Party (as one of its spokesmen admitted) had been guided by the principle that "it is better to kill ten innocent people than to let one enemy escape."<sup>6</sup>

## III

In the midst of the events we have so briefly described, the 1954 Geneva Conference brought the Franco-Viet Minh war to a close and ended the second act of Viet Nam's present political drama. This conference produced a set of four interrelated documents known collectively as the "Geneva Accords." Three were cease-fire agreements (one each for Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam) and the fourth an unsigned "Final Declaration," whose juridical status is open to dispute. A variety of external political considerations and pressures (including French domestic politics) had considerably more influence on the language of the Accords than the objective realities of the situation in Viet Nam. The problem of extricating France from her Indochinese entanglements as gracefully as possible was effectively solved and the shooting was temporarily halted, but more fundamental questions regarding Viet Nam's political future were ignored or swept under the rug. At the time, the Accords' crucial lacunæ and ambiguities seemed relatively unimportant, since most of the Conference's participants considered it virtually inevitable that all of Viet Nam would soon be ruled by a Viet Minh régime headed by the benign and (so it was thought) universally es-

<sup>6</sup> Hoang Van Chi, "From Colonialism to Communism." London: Pall Mall, 1964 (also Praeger, New York), p. 213. This detailed study of the events we have outlined by a Vietnamese scholar and former Viet Minh cadre merits the careful attention of anyone interested in Vietnamese affairs.



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teemed "Uncle Ho." Their significance did not become manifest until several years later.

Although the legal predecessor of the present Saigon government attended the Conference (as the "Associated State of Viet Nam"), none of the documents emanating from Geneva mentioned it by name or assigned it any rights or status. The Viet Nam cease-fire agreement was signed by a French general on behalf of the "Commander-in-Chief of the French Union Forces in Indochina" and by the D.R.V.'s Vice Minister for National Defense on behalf of the "Commander-in-Chief of the People's Army of Viet Nam." In discussing "political and administrative measures in the two regrouping zones" (Article 14), it makes a passing reference to "general elections which will bring about the unification of Viet Nam," a theme amplified but not clarified in the Conference's "Final Declaration" (which set a July 1956 deadline). Nowhere was it specified what precisely the Vietnamese were supposed to vote on or how the rights of various elements within the Vietnamese body politic were to be protected. Not surprisingly, the Saigon government objected formally and strenuously to these vague and airy dicta concerning Viet Nam's future fate, stressing that it was not a party to these agreements and hence could not consider itself bound by them.<sup>7</sup>

Some of Ho's lieutenants felt that the Geneva settlement had cheated them of the full fruits of their victory, but on the whole the Communists had no reason to be dissatisfied with the results. The land-reform program was then in full cry and consolidation of Communist control over the North was the task immediately at hand. The South could wait, particularly since its chances of survival as an independent political entity seemed nil at the time.

The Lao Dong leadership went through the motions of overt compliance with the provisions of the Viet Nam cease-fire agreement, though in doing so they took a number of steps to preserve

<sup>7</sup> The American position was formally enunciated by President Eisenhower in a July 21, 1954, statement, which said in part: "... the United States has not itself been party to or bound by the decisions taken by the Conference, but it is our hope that it will lead to the establishment of peace consistent with the rights and needs of the countries concerned. The agreement contains features which we do not like, but a great deal depends on how they work in practice.

"The United States is issuing at Geneva a statement to the effect that it is not prepared to join in the Conference declaration, but, as loyal members of the United Nations, we also say that, in compliance with the obligations and principles contained in Article 2 of the United Nations Charter, the United States will not use force to disturb the settlement. We also say that any renewal of Communist aggression would be viewed by us as a matter of grave concern."

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a subversive potential in the South and thus ensure themselves against unfavorable political contingencies. In accordance with the agreement, some 50,000 Viet Minh troops were regrouped in specified areas below the 17th parallel and taken north, along with 25,000-odd Viet Minh adherents and supporters. The Communists were very careful, however, to leave behind a network of cadres, which were instructed to blend into the scenery, deny Communist affiliation and agitate in favor of the scheduled elections. They also left behind a large number of weapons caches (3,561 of which were discovered between September 1954 and June 1959) against the day when their southern apparatus might have to augment political action with armed force. The composition of the units taken north was also carefully structured with an eye to possible future needs. The Communists made sure that many of the persons involved were young, employing both coercion and impressment to get the kind of people that they wanted. Before they departed, personnel designated for regroupment were strongly encouraged or, in many cases, directly ordered to contract local marriages and family alliances in South Viet Nam. These would stand them in good stead if they ever had to return.

In the aftermath of Geneva, the area south of the 17th parallel was in a state of political chaos bordering on anarchy. Ngo Dinh Diem, who became Premier on July 7, 1954, had only the shell of a government, no competent civil service and a far from trustworthy army. In addition to all its other difficulties, the Diem government was also soon faced with an unexpected problem of major magnitude: refugees from the North. The myth that the Viet Minh was a purely nationalist movement to which virtually all Vietnamese freely gave their political allegiance and that "Uncle Ho" was almost universally loved and esteemed by his compatriots was rudely shattered soon after Geneva by what became, proportionately, one of history's most spectacular politically motivated migrations.

Article 14-d of the Viet Nam cease-fire agreement promised that civilians could move freely to whichever "regrouping zone" they preferred. The Communists accepted this provision with a notable lack of enthusiasm, hindered its implementation in a variety of ways and eventually, when its application became altogether too embarrassing, flagrantly violated it. Despite all Communist intimidation, obstruction and harassment, however, some 900,000 people fled from the North to the South uprooting

themselves and their families in order to avoid living under Ho Chi Minh's Communist régime. (Given the relative population sizes, this was the political equivalent of 9,000,000 Americans leaving the United States.) As many as 400,000 more wanted to leave, and were entitled to do so under Article 14-d, but were not permitted by the Communist authorities to depart.

The two-year period from 1954 to 1956 was one of political progress and achievement in South Viet Nam that would have been considered impossible at the time of Geneva. The situation which prevailed in the summer of 1956 forced Hanoi to take stock of its prospects. The rather pro forma protests made by North Viet Nam at the passing of the Geneva election deadline suggest that Hanoi's rulers were not so perturbed by the fact that the elections were not held as they were over the increasing disparity between political life north and south of the 17th parallel, a contrast considerably less than flattering to their régime. The North was just emerging from the throes of the land-reform campaign and was in a state of economic turmoil, while the South presented a picture of increasing political stability and incipient prosperity.

Hanoi accordingly recognized that more decisive action would be required if the South was to be brought under its control. Instructions were transmitted to the Communist network left behind in the South directing these cadres to begin agitation and political organization. The Lao Dong Party set up a department of its Central Committee called "the Central Reunification Department," which was made responsible for all matters concerning individuals who had been regrouped to the North during the post-Geneva exchange of forces. The following year (1957) a P.A.V.N. Major-General named Nguyen Van Vinh, who had served in various responsible posts in the South during the Franco-Viet Minh war, was named chairman of this Reunification Department, an office he still holds.

The 1956-1958 period was unusually complex, even for Viet Nam. Diem, in effect, reached his political high-water mark sometime around mid-1957. After that, his methods of operation, traits of character and dependence on his family became set with ever increasing rigidity along lines which ultimately led to his downfall. Despite the undeniable progress of its early years, his government was never successful in giving the bulk of the South Vietnamese peasantry positive reasons for identifying their personal fortunes with its political cause. The administrators Diem

posted to the countryside were often corrupt and seldom native to the areas to which they were assigned, a fact which caused them to be considered as "foreigners" by the intensely clannish and provincial peasantry. Land policies, often admirable in phraseology, were notably weak in execution and frequently operated to the benefit of absentee landlords rather than those who actually tilled the soil.

Such factors as these, coupled with the still manifest consequences of a decade of war, generated genuine grievances among the peasantry which the Communists were quick to exploit and exacerbate. Communist cadres began their organizational efforts among the disgruntled and the ill-served. They harped on local issues and avoided preaching Marxist doctrine. Cells were formed, village committees established and small military units organized. A pattern of politically motivated terror began to emerge, directed against the representatives of the Saigon government and concentrated on the very bad and the very good. The former were liquidated to win favor with the peasantry; the latter because their effectiveness was a bar to the achievement of Communist objectives. The terror was directed not only against officials but against all whose operations were essential to the functioning of organized political society: schoolteachers, health workers, agricultural officials, etc. The scale and scope of this terrorist and insurrectionary activity mounted slowly but steadily. By the end of 1958 the participants in this incipient insurgency, whom Saigon quite accurately termed the "Viet Cong," constituted a serious threat to South Viet Nam's political stability.

Despite the increasing trouble that Viet Cong bands were causing and despite the Viet Cong's initial success in organizational work, Hanoi was far from satisfied with the pace of Viet Cong progress and was particularly chagrined at the movement's failure to win a really significant political following. Several Viet Cong cadre members who were subsequently captured have reported that in late 1958 Le Duan himself was sent on an extensive inspection trip in the South, and that upon his return to Hanoi in early 1959 he presented a list of recommendations subsequently adopted by the Lao Dong Central Committee and referred to in Viet Cong cadre training sessions as "Resolution 15." These recommendations laid out the whole future course of the southern insurgency, including the establishment of a National Liberation Front to be controlled by the Central Committee of

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the South Vietnamese branch of the Lao Dong Party and supported by a South Vietnamese "liberation army." The Front was to be charged with conducting a political struggle, backed by armed force, designed to neutralize the South and pave the way for "reunification," *i.e.* political domination by Hanoi. We can be certain that some such decisions were made about this time, for in May 1959 the Lao Dong Central Committee declared that "the time has come to struggle heroically and perseveringly to smash [the G.V.N.]."

The consequences of these Hanoi decisions became increasingly apparent during the eighteen months which followed the Central Committee's May 1959 meeting. The scale and intensity of Viet Cong activity began to increase by quantum jumps. Communist military moves in Laos secured the corridor area along the North Vietnamese border and infiltrators from the North began moving down the "Ho Chi Minh Trail": a few hundred in 1959, around 3,000 in 1960, and over 10,000 in 1961.

During 1959 and 1960 further evolution of the various stresses within the South Vietnamese body politic occurred. Diem's military establishment had been designed to counter the threat of conventional invasion and proved ill suited to cope with insurrectionary warfare. The quality of government administrators grew worse rather than better as Diem became increasingly inclined, in making key appointments, to put loyalty to himself and his family ahead of ability. His agrarian policies, particularly the disastrous "agroville" program of 1959, provided fresh sources of rural discontent. The Viet Cong were quick to take advantage of the government's errors and steadily heightened the intensity of their terrorist activity. To complicate matters further there were rising political pressures within the non-Communist camp and a growing feeling that Diem had to be ousted before his methods of government made a Communist victory inevitable.

During the 1958-1960 period, Hanoi's hand in southern troubles was quite imperfectly concealed. In August 1958 Hanoi Radio, billing itself as "the voice of the Liberation Front," broadcast instructions to the Viet Cong armed forces and village cadres directing them to adapt themselves to the requirements of the South Vietnamese political situation in order to carry out their missions. In October 1958, it openly appealed to the highland tribes to revolt, noting that "the government of our beloved Ho is standing behind you." In September 1959 and again in Feb-

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ruary 1960, Hanoi commented on recent Viet Cong military forays by terming them "our attacks" and praising the "skill of our commander and the good will of our soldiers."

In September 1960 an almost open official seal was affixed to Hanoi's plans for southern insurgency when, at the Third National Congress of the Lao Dong Party, Le Duan made a lengthy speech in which he stated: "The present National Congress . . . will define for the whole Party and the whole people the line for carrying out the socialist revolution in the North, for the completion of the national people's democratic revolution throughout the country, for the struggle to achieve national reunification." In this speech Le Duan made a public call for the creation of a "broad national united front" in the South. In effect, he was making public the policy decisions which the Lao Dong Party had made during the preceding months. From the tone and temper of Le Duan's address it was apparent that the Viet Cong insurrection was about to move into the stage of open war.

## IV

Toward the end of January 1961, Hanoi Radio announced that "various forces opposing the fascist Ngo Dinh Diem régime" had formed a "National Front for the Liberation of South Viet Nam" (N.L.F.) on December 20, 1960, and that it had issued a manifesto and ten-point political program. The language of both, as broadcast by Hanoi, made the Front's political parentage abundantly clear. The program's fourth point, for example, was "to carry out land rent reduction, guarantee the peasants' right to till their present plots of land, and redistribute communal land in preparation for land reform." To knowledgeable Vietnamese, such words as these made it chillingly obvious who was behind the Front and what lay in store for South Viet Nam should it ever come to power.

On February 11, 1961, Hanoi devoted a second broadcast to the N.L.F.'s manifesto and program, blandly changing the language of both to tone down the more blatant Communist terminology of the initial version. However, even the milder second version (which became the "official" text) borrowed extensively from Le Duan's September speech and left little doubt about the Front's true sponsors or objectives.

After the Hanoi Radio announcements, the Viet Cong immediately began consolidating all of its activities—military as well

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as political—under the N.L.F. banner and conducting intensive organizational activity in its name. A propaganda outlet, the Liberation News Agency, was promptly established and began pouring forth announcements and stories (replayed by Hanoi and by Communist media throughout the world) designed to portray the Front as a spontaneous, indigenous coalition of South Vietnamese nationalists. For the first year of its alleged existence, however, the N.L.F. was a shadowy thing with no definable structure and a faceless, unidentified leadership.

The Front was but one of the two organizational instruments Hanoi had deemed essential to the successful pursuit of its political objectives south of the 17th parallel. The other—designedly less well known in the West but more important within South Viet Nam itself—was first brought to light in a Liberation News Agency broadcast on January 13, 1962, which announced that a “conference of Marxist-Leninist delegates” had met in South Viet Nam “during the last days of December 1961,” and decided that “to fulfill their historic and glorious duty . . . workers, peasants and laborers in South Viet Nam need a vanguard group serving as a thoroughly revolutionary party.” Accordingly, the conference had established the People’s Revolutionary Party (P.R.P.), which came into official existence on January 1, 1962.<sup>8</sup> The founders “warmly supported” the program of the N.L.F. and “volunteered to join its ranks.” In point of fact, the P.R.P. immediately took complete control of the Front (“assumed the historic mission of playing the role of vanguard body to the southern revolution”) and is currently referred to by Hanoi as “the soul” of the N.L.F.<sup>9</sup>

Captured Communist documents have since made it abundantly clear that the “creation” of the P.R.P. involved what would be termed in American business parlance the “spin-off” of a wholly owned subsidiary. The P.R.P. was and is, in fact, simply the southern branch of the Lao Dong. As one pertinent Party

<sup>8</sup> The only two of these “delegates” who have been subsequently identified are Vo Chi Chong, now a Vice Chairman of N.L.F.’s Presidium and member of the P.R.P.’s Executive Committee, and Huynh Van Tam, now the N.L.F.’s representative in Algiers, where he devotes considerable time to cultivating Western newsmen, deceiving some of them about his own political background and the true nature of the organization he represents in a manner reminiscent of Chou En-lai’s similar successes during the mid-1940s.

<sup>9</sup> These phrases appear in “The Vietnamese People’s Revolutionary Party and Its Historic Mission of Liberating the South,” an article in the January 1966 issue of the Lao Dong Party’s theoretical journal *Hoc Tap*. The same article notes: “The experiences of the world and our country’s revolutions have shown that in order to win the greatest success, the national democratic revolution must be led by a workers’ revolutionary party”—i.e. a Communist party.

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directive put it: "The People's Revolutionary Party has only the appearance of an independent existence; actually, our party is nothing but the Lao Dong Party of Viet Nam (Viet Minh Communist Party) unified from north to south under the direction of the central executive committee of the party, the chief of which is President Ho."<sup>10</sup> The P.R.P. serves as the principal vehicle for maintaining Lao Dong—i.e. North Vietnamese—control over the Viet Cong insurgency.

As the organizational structure of the Viet Cong movement has expanded over the past four years, its general outlines have become fairly well known. In the insurgency's initial phase (1954-1959), the Communists retained the Viet Minh's division of what is now South Viet Nam into "Interzone V" (French Annam below the 17th parallel) and the "Nambo" (Cochin China), with each area under Hanoi's direct control. In late 1960 or early 1961, this arrangement was scrapped and field control over all aspects of the Viet Cong insurgency vested in a still existing, single command headquarters, originally known as the Central Office for South Viet Nam (or C.O.S.V.N.—a term still in circulation) but now usually referred to by captured Viet Cong as simply the P.R.P.'s Central Committee. This command entity, which also contains the headquarters of the N.L.F., is a mobile and sometimes peripatetic body, usually located in the extreme northwestern tip of Tay Ninh province in prudent proximity to the Cambodian border. Under this Central Committee headquarters, the Viet Cong divide South Viet Nam into five numbered military "regions" and one "special zone" for Saigon and its immediate environs. Each of the five regions, in turn, is divided into provinces; each province into districts; and each district into villages.<sup>11</sup> The Viet Cong's provinces, districts and villages are administratively comparable and roughly equivalent in area to those of the South Vietnamese Government. But their boundaries do not coincide, thus complicating Saigon's administrative problems in reacting to insurgent activities.

Though the outlines of the Viet Cong's organizational structure are fairly well known, the identities of its leaders are not. They are faceless men, veteran Communist revolutionaries who

<sup>10</sup> This particular document, dated December 7, 1961, was captured in Ba Xuyen Province. Its text may be found, among other places, in the Department of State's White Paper, "Aggression from the North."

<sup>11</sup> In Viet Nam, a "village" is not a cluster of huts but an administrative entity roughly comparable to an American township.



have made a lifetime practice of masking their identities under various aliases and *noms de guerre* and who take particular pains to stay hidden in the background in order to support the political fiction that the insurgency is directed by the N.L.F. and the Front's ostensible officers.

At the 1962 Geneva Conference on Laos, a member of the North Vietnamese delegation inadvertently commented that the published roster of the Lao Dong Party's Central Committee did not include some members whose identities were kept secret because they were "directing military operations in South Viet Nam." One of the four examples he cited was "Nguyen Van Cuc,"<sup>12</sup> which is one of the aliases used by the Chairman of the P.R.P. This Lao Dong Central Committee member, whose true name we do not know, is probably the overall field director of the Viet Cong insurgency in South Viet Nam. The overall commander of Viet Cong military forces (who would be a subordinate of Cuc's within the Communist command structure) is almost certainly the Chairman of the (P.R.P.) Central Committee's Military Committee—a man who uses the name Tran Nam Trung but whom several captured Viet Cong cadre members have insisted is actually Lieutenant-General Tran Van Tra, a Deputy Chief of Staff of the North Vietnamese army and an alternate member of the Lao Dong Central Committee. The director of all Viet Cong activity in V.C. Military Region 5 (the northernmost third of South Viet Nam) is Nguyen Don, a Major-General in the North Vietnamese army and another alternate member of the Lao Dong Central Committee, who in 1961 was commander of the North Vietnamese 305th Division but came south late that year or early in 1962. In short, not only does the P.R.P. control all aspects of the Viet Cong movement, including the N.L.F., and not only is it a subordinate echelon of the North Vietnamese Lao Dong Party, but the P.R.P.'s own leaders appear to be individuals who themselves occupy ranking positions within the Lao Dong Party hierarchy.

As indicated above, for the first year of its existence the N.L.F. was as shadowy and faceless an organization as the P.R.P. is today. It was allegedly created "after a conference of representatives of various forces opposing the fascist régime in South Viet Nam," but the identities of these representatives or the "forces"

<sup>12</sup> P. J. Honey, "North Vietnam's Workers' Party and South Vietnam's People's Revolutionary Party," *Pacific Affairs Quarterly*, Winter 1962-1963, p. 383.

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they represented were never specified. The myth of the Front was not fleshed out with public organizational substance or overt leadership until after the P.R.P was presented as its "vanguard" element. The N.L.F. now claims to be a coalition of over forty "associated organizations" which, collectively, purport to represent virtually all shades and strata of South Vietnamese political and social life. This coalition includes three "political parties": the P.R.P., the "Democratic Party" and the "Radical Socialist Party." (The latter two bear almost exactly the same names as the two "minor" parties allowed to exist in North Viet Nam and are obviously intended to play similar roles.) In their present name or form, virtually none of its affiliated organizations antedates the founding of the N.L.F. itself, many almost certainly exist only on paper, and a careful analysis of the N.L.F.'s own propaganda makes it clear that a goodly number have identical officers, directorates and staffs. Some of these organizations, however, have acquired substance after the fact, as it were, and now play important roles in the N.L.F.'s efforts to organize and control the rural populace.

It is fairly easy to devise an organizational structure capable of lending verisimilitude to a political fiction, doubly so if one is trying to deceive a foreign audience unversed in local political affairs. Fleshing this structure out with live, known individuals to occupy posts of public prominence is considerably more difficult. The Viet Cong obviously hoped to attract to the N.L.F. South Vietnamese of personal stature and renown, preferably individuals not immediately identifiable as Communists or Communist sympathizers, who could enhance the Front's prestige and political attractiveness and provide a more or less innocent façade behind which the N.L.F.'s Communist masters could operate in secure obscurity. To date the Viet Cong have been notably unsuccessful in this regard, though the full measure of their failure is far better appreciated within South Viet Nam itself than it is abroad. No Vietnamese of what could accurately be described as significant personal prestige or professional standing—not even one of known leftist persuasion—has ever been willing to associate himself publicly with the N.L.F. or lend it the use of his name.

The N.L.F.'s first Central Committee was not announced until March 1962, well over a year after the Front's supposedly spontaneous creation. Though the Committee purportedly had 52

members, the N.L.F. was able to come up with only 31 names, most of which were virtually unknown even within South Viet Nam. The 41-member second (and current) Central Committee, announced in January 1964, is equally lacking in distinction.

The Chairman of the N.L.F.'s Presidium and Central Committee is Nguyen Huu Tho, a former provincial lawyer with a long record of activity in Communist-sponsored causes but of little political reputation or professional standing among his former colleagues at the South Vietnamese bar, who generally categorize him as having been an "*avocat sans briefs*." The N.L.F.'s present Secretary-General (also the Secretary-General of the "Democratic Party" and the Chairman of the N.L.F.'s Saigon Zone Committee) is Huynh Tan Phat, usually described in N.L.F. propaganda as an "architect," though one would be hard pressed to point to any edifices he has designed. From 1945 until 1948 he apparently served as a member of the Viet Minh/Viet Cong Executive Committee in Nambo and as the Communists' propaganda chief for their Saigon Special Zone. The N.L.F.'s First Secretary-General (also the Secretary-General of the "Radical Socialist Party") was Nguyen Van Hieu, now its principal travelling representative abroad. A former journalist and teacher (some say of biology, some of mathematics), Hieu has been a Communist propagandist since the late 1940s. The Chairman of the N.L.F.'s External Relations (*i.e.* foreign affairs and propaganda) Committee is Tran Buu Kiem, a Central Committee member who served briefly as Secretary-General after Hieu and before Phat. Described in official N.L.F. biographies as an "intellectual and ardent patriot," Kiem has spent most of the past two decades as a leader in various Communist-front youth groups. Such figures as these are the best the Front has been able to come up with to staff its most prominent public offices. Their organizational and revolutionary talents may be impressive, but their personal stature and prestige among the South Vietnamese people are not.

v

Over the past four years the Viet Cong have labored mightily to improve their image beyond South Viet Nam's borders and to enlist a broad spectrum of international support for their cause; to develop their organizational structure within South Viet Nam, thus strengthening their internal political position;

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and to expand their military effort, to facilitate achievement of their political goals and if possible to generate an aura of invincibility capable of breaking their adversaries' will to continue the struggle.

The image-building campaign abroad has been designed to publicize the N.L.F. and inflate its prestige and reputation. Its goal has been to get the N.L.F. generally accepted as an indigenous South Vietnamese political coalition (admittedly with some Communist members) which sprang up spontaneously to combat the harsh excesses of the U.S.-supported Diem régime, and which seeks only peace, democracy and reunification as provided for in the Geneva agreements. Though moral—and, to some extent perhaps, physical—support may be afforded by North Viet Nam and other fraternal socialist states (so the argument runs), the N.L.F. is basically an independent political entity with a policy and will of its own. This campaign has been waged through the propaganda disseminated by the Liberation News Agency, replayed and echoed by Communist (and non-Communist) media throughout the world; through a steady flow of messages from the Front to foreign governments and heads of state (particularly of neutralist Afro-Asian nations); by ever increasing attendance at foreign conferences and meetings (generally Communist or leftist sponsored) by a small handful of indefatigable N.L.F. representatives; and by the establishment of permanent N.L.F. "missions" in Havana, Peking, Moscow, Prague, East Berlin, Budapest, Cairo, Djakarta and Algiers. All of this activity has profited from the fact that knowledge of the realities of political life in South Viet Nam does not extend much beyond its frontiers; all of it has been guided by a keen awareness of the effectiveness of incessant repetition in converting myth to assumed reality.

Throughout South Viet Nam, the Viet Cong have developed and employed the N.L.F. apparatus in their intensive effort to organize the population (especially the rural population), involve it in their insurgency campaign and bring it under their political domination. The detailed application of this effort varies from locality to locality, and is materially influenced by such local factors as the relative degree of Viet Cong strength in the area. The objective, however, is always to secure total participation and total involvement on the part of the local population in order to establish total Viet Cong control. They endeavor to

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persuade—and, if conditions permit, compel—every inhabitant of a given area to join and work actively in some N.L.F. component organization. Farmers are encouraged or forced to join the Liberation Peasants' Association; women, the Liberation Women's Association; children, the Liberation Youth Association. Where Viet Cong control is strong, no one escapes the net. Physically fit males not sent off to some other Viet Cong military unit serve in the local militia squad or self-defense platoon; women, children and old men help make bamboo stakes and traps or dig up roads to harass government forces. They serve as informants and couriers, or go on purchasing expeditions to nearby government-controlled market towns. Everyone participates and ensures that his neighbor does so as well. All of this activity is coordinated and directed by local N.L.F. committees which, where circumstances permit, assume the prerogatives and functions of local government. These local committees in turn are directed by superior echelons, capped, at least ostensibly, by the Central Committee of the N.L.F. itself.

The N.L.F.'s organizational structure is paralleled and controlled at each echelon by a complementary P.R.P. structure. Under the general command of its Central Committee, the P.R.P. is organized on a geographic basis through the various regions, provinces and districts down to the village level. Each geographic echelon has a directing committee responsible for controlling all P.R.P.—hence all Viet Cong, including N.L.F.—activities within its area. These committees vary in size and organizational complexity, even among equivalent geographic echelons, but each one has a single chairman and several subordinate members or subcommittees with specific functional responsibilities. The number and nomenclature of these functional subcommittees also varies from area to area, but they normally cover military affairs, economic and financial affairs, and what the Communists term “front affairs and civilian proselytizing,” whose chairman is responsible for controlling all N.L.F. activity in that area. If the P.R.P. organization at that echelon is sufficiently well developed, he in turn will have subordinate members of his P.R.P. subcommittee to direct each of the local associations affiliated with the N.L.F. Though captured documents indicate that the Viet Cong try to keep the level of overt P.R.P. participation below two-fifths of the total membership of any given N.L.F. component, the organizational

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structure we have just described (reinforced by a network of covert P.R.P. cells throughout the N.L.F.) keeps all components of the N.L.F. at every level under complete P.R.P. control.

The Viet Cong's terrorist and military apparatus was developed and is directed by this same organizational structure, which ensures that armed activity at all levels is rigidly subordinated to political objectives and kept under tight Party control. The Viet Cong military establishment now has over 90,000 full-time troops (including over 12,000 North Vietnamese regulars) augmented and supported by something over 100,000 paramilitary personnel and part-time guerrillas. This whole force, however, was built up for political reasons, to serve political ends. The Viet Cong political apparatus was at work laying the foundations for insurgency long before there was even so much as a Viet Cong hamlet self-defense squad.

The director of the military affairs subcommittee (mentioned above) is frequently also the commander of the Viet Cong force attached to that geographic echelon. Village directing committees have village platoons under their control; district committees, district companies; provincial committees, provincial battalions. Regional committees have forces of regimental and multi-regimental size at their disposal, and the whole Viet Cong military establishment is subject to the direction of the P.R.P.'s Central Committee. Throughout this military structure, the same basic principles of organization and command relationship are uniformly applied. There is no such thing as a Viet Cong military unit of any size independent of the Party's political apparatus or free from tight political control. Probably no more than a third of the Viet Cong forces are Party members, but by virtue of its organizational mechanism the P.R.P. controls the "Liberation Army" in the same way that it controls the National Liberation Front.

An understanding of the Viet Cong's organizational structure enables us to recognize the real significance and function of the more than 50,000 persons infiltrated into South Viet Nam since the Lao Dong Party's 1959 decision to pursue its objective of political conquest by waging insurgent war. Until mid- to late 1963 these infiltrators were virtually all ethnic southerners drawn from the pool of regrouped Viet Minh forces and supporters taken north in 1954. They were not foot soldiers or cannon fodder (at least not until Hanoi began sending in whole North Viet-

namese units in late 1964 or early 1965). Instead they were disciplined, trained and indoctrinated cadres and technicians. They became the squad leaders, platoon leaders, political officers, staff officers, unit commanders, weapons and communications specialists who built the Viet Cong's military force into what it is today. They also became the village, district, provincial and regional committee chiefs and key committee members who built the Viet Cong's political apparatus.

The earlier arrivals had had at least five years of indoctrination and training in North Viet Nam, or elsewhere in the Communist bloc, before departing on their southern missions; some of the later arrivals have had nearly a decade of such preparation. Until the recent sharp rise in Viet Cong battlefield casualties, approximately a third of all the personnel in Viet Cong military units at and above the district company level were "returnees" trained in the North. At least half of the membership of most P.R.P. district committees, and an even larger proportion at higher echelons, also appear to be "returnees." Without this infiltration from the North, in short, the present Viet Cong organization could never have been developed.

VI

The Viet Cong insurgency is clearly a masterpiece of revolutionary organization, but its total effectiveness and real political strength are extremely difficult to assess. The bulk of the Viet Cong's organizational efforts have been expended in rural areas and it is there that they are strongest. (The government controls all of the cities, major towns and provincial capitals and all but a handful of the district seats.) There are indications, however, that sharply rising Viet Cong taxation rates, increasingly frequent resort to impressment to secure troops, and the Viet Cong's manifest inability to deliver on political promises of earlier years are all beginning to erode their base of rural support. During the past year nearly 800,000 refugees fled from the hinterland to the vicinity of government-controlled towns. Some of these were fleeing from natural disasters, some from the simple hazards of war (though the direction in which persons of this category opted to flee is significant), but many were obviously endeavoring to get out from under the Viet Cong. Furthermore, in assessing Communist claims of control it should be noted that over half of the rural population voted in the May 1965 provincial elections, despite Viet Cong orders to boycott them.

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In the cities, the Viet Cong have an obvious terrorist capability but are politically quite weak—a fact of which they are aware and which, according to captured documents, causes them considerable embarrassment. They have been unable to turn the urban political ferment of the past three years to any obvious immediate advantage. None of the participants in the genuine social revolution now taking place in the urban areas of South Viet Nam has sought Viet Cong support or entertained overtures of political alliance. Though they have undoubtedly penetrated such groups as the Buddhists and the students, the Viet Cong have made no visible headway in subverting or bringing them under the N.L.F. banner. Just how weak the Viet Cong are in the cities was demonstrated twice last fall (on October 15 and December 19) when two public calls by the Viet Cong for a “general strike” went totally unheeded and produced no visible change whatsoever in the pattern of urban life.

Despite its leaders’ obvious organizational talents and revolutionary skills, the Viet Cong movement is beset with a number of fundamental weaknesses. It has no universally appealing theme in any way comparable to the Viet Minh’s espousal of anti-French nationalism. Persistent propaganda efforts to portray the Americans as successor imperialists to the French have simply never taken hold. The concept of reunification has relatively little appeal for peasants who regard someone from the next province as an alien. The idea of reunification does appeal to politically minded urban elements, particularly to refugees from the North, but within such circles there is a great reluctance to accept the Viet Cong’s identification of “reunification” with political domination by the present Hanoi régime. Having lived through the sequence of historical events we have outlined, politically conscious Vietnamese are not easily deceived by the N.L.F.’s pretensions to independence and freedom from northern control, particularly since the military side of the Viet Cong insurgency is now being waged with an ever larger number of North Vietnamese troops.

The current struggle in South Viet Nam is an historically rooted, political phenomenon of infinite complexity, particularly since it involves an externally directed Communist drive for power interlarded with a genuine indigenous social revolution. In analyzing such a phenomenon, “truth” is often a function of one’s angle of vision, and myth is not always easy to distinguish from reality. Despite the fact that there are many aspects of the cur-



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rent situation in Viet Nam concerning which confident assertion is a mark of ignorance or disingenuous intent, there are certain aspects of the insurgency, and of the Viet Cong structure through which it is being waged, which are not open to intellectually honest dispute.

There are unquestionably many non-Communists heroically serving in various components of the National Liberation Front out of a desire to redress genuine grievances or in the honest belief that they are thereby helping to build a better political structure for their native land. As an organization, however, the N.L.F. is a contrived political mechanism with no indigenous roots, subject to the ultimate control of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi.

The relationship between the Viet Cong and the D.R.V. is not that of politically like-minded allies. Instead, it is essentially the relationship between a field command and its parent headquarters. Such relationships are never free from elements of tension and discord. Within the Viet Cong movement, and even within its controlling hierarchy, there are unquestionably varying judgments (at least privately held ones) about the wisdom of present tactics and the best course of future action. (There are obvious differences of opinion regarding the struggle in Viet Nam even within the Lao Dong Party Politburo.) Nevertheless, the whole Viet Cong organizational structure and chain of command has been carefully designed to minimize the risks of insubordination. Though for tactical reasons the overt propaganda outlets and spokesmen of the N.L.F. sometimes take political positions which differ at least in emphasis from those emanating from Hanoi, the chances of the Viet Cong's developing or adopting a genuinely independent political line in opposition to orders received from North Viet Nam through the Lao Dong Party apparatus are slight indeed.

Finally, although the Viet Cong organization is unquestionably a major factor in the South Vietnamese political scene, the N.L.F. mechanism which it controls has no serious claim to being considered, as Hanoi insists, the "sole legitimate voice of the South Vietnamese people." Were it ever to be accepted as such, the record of what has happened in North Viet Nam in the years since 1951 makes it abundantly clear what lies in store for the more than 16,000,000 Vietnamese who live south of the 17th parallel, especially for those who have resolutely fought against the Viet Cong insurgency from its inception.